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The Moral Status of Mice

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In a Panglossian "best of all possible worlds," the codes of morality are simple as well as just, but in reality, those interested in moral philosophy soon find themselves treading murky waters. This simple fact is as true when contemplating the moral status of animals as it is when making moral decisions that pertain to people. For example, readers of the *American Psychologist* have recently been exposed to impassioned, yet well-reasoned arguments both attacking (Rollin, 1985) and defending (Miller, 1985; Feeney, 1987) the use of animals in medical and behavioral research. Not surprisingly, these articles have generated, and will continue to generate, responses from sincere readers representing both sides of the issue (see the following comments in the July 1986 *American Psychologist:* Glenn, 1986; Kelly, 1986; Lansdell, 1986; Moriarty & Allen, 1986; Philp, 1986; Rollin, 1986).

The question of our moral responsibilities toward other species is of great significance for the biomedical community, including psychologists. It is unlikely, however, that the debate over the use of animals in research will be satisfactorily resolved either by appeals to emotion or logic. Other facets of human psychology, such as our tendency to assign roles and labels, may have a profound influence on ethical decision making. This results in paradoxes and inconsistencies in the moral status of animals. I would like to illustrate this point by examining the treatment of one species, mice, at a particular institution.

A Typology of Mice

The Walters Life Sciences Building at the University of Tennessee is typical of laboratories at research universities. When it was constructed about 10 years ago, a state-of-the-art animal facility was incorporated into the building's design. The section of the building that houses animals is a model of cleanliness, and the animals seem well cared for by diligent personnel. A consulting veterinarian is on the staff. The facility is fully accredited by the American Association for the Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care, and it is inspected regularly by representatives of the United States Department of Agriculture. In addition, every experiment undertaken at the university that uses animal subjects has to be approved by an animal care committee. In sum, the university has made a reasonable attempt at responsible stewardship of the animals used as research subjects. Although the university has demonstrated a sincere concern for the welfare of animal subjects, it has not escaped the paradoxes that emerge in the attempt to legislate ethics. In this case, the paradoxes are a result of the different roles occupied by mice in the building.

The Good Mice

Walters Life Sciences Building is home to about 15,000 mice in a typical year. Of these animals, the overwhelming majority are "good" mice. These are animals that are called upon to sacrifice their lives for what researchers hope will be the betterment of the human condition. They are "guinea pig" mice. Their very existence depends on their utility; they would not exist if they were not lab animals. In this respect, they are no different from any other domestic animals. Their status as good mice entitles them to the protection, such as it is, of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), as well as the oversight of the animal care committee. It is for these animals that a multimillion dollar facility was constructed.

The Bad Mice

Pest mice also inhabit the Walters Life Sciences Building, but they are accorded far different status than the research subjects. These are free-ranging animals that can occasionally be glimpsed scurrying along the corridors. Pest mice are not common but are a legitimate threat in a laboratory facility where extensive precautions are taken to prevent contamination between rooms. Thus, these animals must be eliminated as expeditiously as possible. There are several potential techniques for eliminating pest rodents, though most have been found unsatisfactory by the staff of the facility. The animal caretakers were hesitant to use poisons in the laboratory for fear of contaminating research animals. Snap traps, the typical mouse trap found in most households, were found to be ineffective. Thus, the preferred technique for the capture of pest rodents became the "sticky trap."

Sticky traps are essentially a rodent form of flypaper. The traps consist of sheets of cardboard about a foot square, covered with tenacious adhesive and embedded with a chemical mouse attractant. The traps are left in areas where pest mice travel and are checked daily. When a mouse steps on the trap, it becomes profoundly stuck; as the animal struggles, its fur inexorably becomes bound to the trap. Most animals are caught at night and are found the next morning by the staff. Though the traps are not embedded with toxins, about half of the animals are dead when they are found. Mice that are still alive when discovered are immediately

gassed. (Each trap is used only once. Mice are not peeled from the traps.)

It is clear to me that mice caught in these traps frequently suffer a miserable death, and I expect that most animal care committees would have reservations about approving an experiment in which mice were glued to pieces of cardboard. Thus, there exists a situation whereby a treatment that is morally unacceptable for a "good mouse" (i.e., research animal) is judged permissible for pest animals of the same species. This paradox is magnified when one realizes the source of "pest mice." As the building does not have a problem with wild rodents, these animals are virtually always "good mice" that have escaped. In any facility housing thousands of small creatures, there is inevitably some leakage. Once a research animal hits the floor and becomes an escapee, its moral standing is instantly diminished.

Feeders

The third category of mice that reside in the Walters Life Sciences Building contains relatively few animals but poses unique ethical dilemmas. Some mice are raised as food for carnivorous species that are used in research, and each week a number of these animals are offered to snakes, lizards, and even large toads. Feeders may be adult mice, juveniles, or pinkies (hairless newborns). When it comes to the ethical treatment of feeders, there is not only a conflict of interest between human researchers and nonhuman subjects but also between animal species. The rights of carnivorous snakes and mice are mutually exclusive. This elemental biological truth seems ironic in light of the fact that mammals are covered by the Animal Welfare Act and are deemed worthy of protection by the USDA, whereas snakes and other "lower" vertebrates are specifically excluded.

Feeders occupy a gray area in terms of moral status; they lie somewhere between the good laboratory mice and the bad escapees. Their ambiguous status is further clouded in the case of behavioral research on predation and antipredator tactics. Consider the following. A scientist conducting research on snakes does not need to get prior approval of the animal care committee to feed the research animals a diet of live mice. As many reptiles will only eat live prey, *not* providing them with an adequate supply of live rodents would result in their starvation and would obviously be cruel. However, suppose the investigator is interested in the ethology of antipredator behavior in rodents. As part of the research, he or she might want to introduce live mice into a snake's cage and film the encounters for subsequent analysis. Although nothing has changed from the vantage points of either predator or prey, there is a clear ethical difference in terms of the responsibility of the researcher. In experiments on antipredator responses in which the mouse is the *subject,* the animal falls under the jurisdiction of the animal care committee that must approve the research. If, however, the mouse is simply snake food, its status is quite different, and its use does not have to be approved by the committee. Thus, the moral (and legal) standing of the mouse depends on whether it is labeled *subject* or *food.*

The effect of roles and labels in determining moral status goes beyond the laboratory. For example, my seven-year old son had a mouse as a pet for the past couple of years. The mouse, whose name was Willie, was dearly loved (or at least tolerated) by other members of the family. Willie died recently, and tears were shed. He was accorded the honor of burial in the flower garden, a tombstone made of a piece of slate, and a mini-funeral. At the same time that we were mourning Willie's demise, however, my wife and I were setting snap traps each night in a futile attempt to eliminate the mice that inhabit our kitchen. Just as in the laboratory, the role and subsequent label of the creatures, in this case *pet* or *pest,* determined how the animals were perceived and treated.

What is the point of this discourse? Please note that I have not argued that mice should not be used as research animals nor that the mice are mistreated at the University of Tennessee. On the contrary, I am convinced that the staff of the animal facility as well as the researchers working in the building are humane individuals who do not enjoy animal suffering. Even sticky traps, which are often used in nonlaboratory settings such as farms and factories, may be justified by the lack of suitable alternative trapping methods. Nor do I mean to suggest that it is immoral for mice to be fed to snakes in laboratories. In nature, thousands, perhaps millions, of rodents are consumed each day by predators. I am arguing that the moral judgments we make about other species are neither logical nor consistent. Rather, they are the result of both cerebral and visceral components of the human mind. As such, the roles that animals play in our lives and the labels that we attach to them deeply influence our sense of what is ethical. I suspect that there is an interaction between our labels (i.e., pest, pet, food, subject) and how we treat animals. Labels are, in part, the result of the role that the animal occupies relative to humans; conversely, the label influences the behavior and emotions directed toward the animal.

Paradoxes like those that I have described in the treatment of laboratory mice at the University of Tennessee are inevitable. Moral codes are the product of human psychology, not "pure reason." Because ethical judgments are inextricably bound in a complex matrix of emotion, logic, and self-interest, a better understanding of the *psychology* of how humans arrive at moral decisions will be critical to progress in the area of animal welfare.

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Attitudes Toward Animal Research

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Although animal rights organizations have become more visible and vocal, the question remains as to how widespread such attitudes have become in the population at large. To assess the impression created by animal rights activists that there is growing opposition in this country to the use of animals for research (e.g., Levin, 1977; Rollin, 1986; Vellucci & Grunewald, 1986), we conducted a survey during the spring of 1987 at the State University of New York at Albany. Two-hundred and sixty-three students filled out a written questionnaire. Students in different